

Statement of Significance

The U.S. Court House and Post Office (Court House for the Southern District of California) is nationally significant under NHL Criterion 1 for its role in the court case, *Méndez et al v. Westminster School District* (1946). Between 1945 and 1946, the Court House for the Southern District of California became an exceptionally important site in the annals of postwar American school desegregation efforts and the civil rights history of Mexican and Mexican-American people in the Southwest. The decision in *Méndez et al v. Westminster School District*, a lawsuit filed by five Latino families whose children were denied admission to public schools in Southern California, forbade segregation on the grounds that separate was not equal. The decision by this Federal court—the first to declare that the doctrine of “separate but equal” ran counter to American law—marked a turning point in the legal struggle against segregation in primary education and served as precedence in striking down segregation for Mexican Americans in the Southwest.

Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.¹

Built between 1937 and 1940, the U.S. Court House and Post Office in Los Angeles is an excellent example of a Depression-era Moderne style Federal courthouse and post office.² Set on a large landscaped site on the northern edge of the Los Angeles Civic Center area, the building is composed of stepped rectangular volumes and an above seventeen-story tower. The steel-frame and concrete structure is clad in a light-colored ceramic veneer (with applied texture surfacing) and dark-colored polished granite. Windows are recessed and grouped into vertical banks. Exterior ornamentation includes fluted columns and piers, bas-relief terracotta eagles, and aluminum grilles over some windows. Inside, the building’s program combines embellished public spaces on the ground and first floors with generally unadorned office space on the upper stories. Interior features include extensive terrazzo floors, a variety of marbled lobby walls, ornamentally painted ceilings, and aluminum light fixtures.

The remainder of this section describes the physical features and public spaces essential to illustrating the building’s historical association with the *Méndez et al v. Westminster* case. These features and spaces include the site, the building exterior, the ground and first floor lobbies, the second floor corridor, and U.S. District Courtroom No. 8 where the case was heard. This section is further divided into four subsections. The first three subsections describe the present appearance of the site, the building exterior, and the building interior as well as alterations made to the historic physical appearance. The last subsection assesses how the alterations have impacted the building’s integrity.

The Site

The U.S. District Court House occupies a double-sized block bounded by North Spring and North Main streets on the west and east, and Aliso and Temple streets on the north and south. The prominent ziggurat-like form of the twenty-eight story Los Angeles City Hall (1926-1928) is on an axis across Temple Street and the fourteen-story Beaux Arts style Hall of Justice (1925) is located across Spring Street.³ The three buildings form part of the historic architectural core of the Civic Center. A large park and a modest, one-story modern building is

¹ This physical description is based primarily on text from Chris VerPlanck and Richard Sucre, “U.S. Court House and Post Office,” National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 2005), and supplemented by Page & Turnbull, “U.S. Federal Courthouse: Update of 1986 Historic Structure Report,” U.S. General Services Administration, September 19, 2011; U.S. General Services Administration, “U.S. Courthouse, Los Angeles, CA,” <http://www.gsa.gov/portal/ext/html/site/hb/method/post/category/25431>; and a field site visit conducted in December 2011.

² The courthouse is listed on the National Register under Criterion A, for its significance in community planning, and Criterion C, for its architectural significance.

³ Building dates obtained from U.S. General Services Administration, “U.S. Courthouse, Los Angeles, California,” pamphlet, n.d.

located across Main Street, and a freeway is located across Aliso Street. The court house site has an approximate frontage of 490 feet on North Spring Street, 525 feet on North Main Street, 315 feet on Aliso Street, and 325 feet on Temple Street. The site slopes downward approximately 20 feet from North Spring Street to North Main Street.

The ground dimensions of the courthouse are 472 feet by 183 feet, with the major axis parallel to Spring Street and Main Street. The building sets back approximately 100 feet from North Spring Street and 30 feet from North Main Street. Temple Street's slight diagonal direction reduces the south side setback from approximately 50 feet to 25 feet on the Spring Street side. The attached courthouse garage fronts the sidewalk on Aliso Street.

Wide sidewalks paved in scored concrete lead to the entrance stairs on the Spring Street and Main Street facades. The stairs are flanked by ground-level light wells along the base of the building. Areas between the sidewalk and the building are landscaped with manicured lawn, low hedges, and trees. Mature magnolia trees are located near the garage entrance on Aliso Street. Cast-iron light standards with hanging double pendant fixtures line the sidewalks along Spring Street and Main Street. The light standards are composed of an octagonal base adorned with acanthus leaves and labyrinth frets, a fluted shaft, and a ball finial.

Dark gray Minnesota granite with pink veining unifies the courthouse and its site. Polished granite wraps around the base of the building at a uniform height and polished granite retaining walls extend along Temple and Aliso streets. Rubbed granite curbs border sidewalks and walkways where no retaining walls exist. Granite steps lead to granite platforms at the entrances. The steps are flanked by low cheek walls and flagpole pedestals of polished granite. The stone masonry is of very high quality, exhibiting precise joinery and careful detailing with rounded ends on retaining walls and entrance parapets. The twin flagpoles flanking the Spring and Main street entrances have flaring bronze bases, steel poles, and ball finials of gold-leafed copper. The bronze railings at these entrances have tufted tops and ends cast in a spiral pattern. A similar low railing caps the Aliso Street retaining wall.

Alterations: The landscaping on Spring Street was re-designed in the mid-1990s. This work included the installation of a wheelchair ramp, a new landscaped plaza with period lighting, and concrete bollards to protect the building from truck bombs.

Building Exterior

The U.S. District Court House is of steel-frame and reinforced concrete construction. The structural bays measure approximately 25 feet by 25 feet. The reinforced-concrete walls are 9 to 12 inches thick. The 8-inch reinforced-concrete floors are overlaid with 4-inch filler covering pipes and conduit. The original interior partitions are metal lath and plaster on steel studs.

The court house rises seventeen stories above the ground floor on North Main Street. The building fuses the symmetrical formality of the Classical/Beaux Arts tradition and the stepped massing of the Moderne style. The plan is rectangular with opposite facades largely identical. The building steps back at the fourth story and again at the sixth story, above which rises a twelve-story tower. Six-story wings project from the ends of the building and correspond in elevation to the sixth-story setbacks on the long sides. The composition is terminated by a central two-story penthouse. Roofs are flat and hidden behind tall parapets.

Pale pink matte-glazed ceramic veneer, coated with a "Granitex" surface, clads the structure above its gleaming dark granite base. Minnesota granite is used for the parapet coping. The ceramic veneer is a material similar to terra cotta in composition; however it consists of large flat "tiles" set in a mortar bed applied directly against the

building wall. The dense ceramic veneer is made of de-aired clay molded under high pressure. Approximately 200,000 square feet of this material covers the upper portion of the building. Part of the penthouse is clad in steel coated in a paint that similarly imitates a granite finish.

Fenestration

A striking pattern of dark vertical fenestration marks each facade. Paired windows and spandrels are recessed and grouped in continuous vertical bands, broken only by the parapet at each setback. The windows are double-hung with aluminum sashes. Most of the spandrels are aluminum with a sandblasted finish. Those above the first-story windows are decorated with a single stylized flower in relief. Ceramic veneer spandrels (identical to the wall sheathing) appear beneath the top windows of the lower four-story mass of the building, beneath the top windows of the tower, and in the outer bays of the tower on the Spring and Main street facades. Light ceramic veneer spandrels punctuate the fenestration bands and create borders of dark squares that frame the facades.

North Spring Street Facade

The building's principal facade faces North Spring Street. A three-story, colonnaded recessed entry is flanked on each side by eleven bays of recessed windows that are separated by fluted piers, or pilasters. The entrance contains four engaged fluted columns. The piers and columns have identical capitals consisting of smooth narrow bands embossed with stars. The columns demarcate five similar entrance bays. Each bay has paired bronze doors set within bronze surrounds topped by a projecting curved hood adorned with a stylized eagle. The doors and surrounds are embossed with abstract geometric designs. Ornate aluminum grilles surmount each entry to the height of the bay. The grilles have borders of stylized flowers and cruciform grids bearing the seals of the U.S. Government departments originally housed in the building: State, Treasury, War, Justice, and Post Office. Two mirror-image bas-relief medallions of terra cotta flank the entrance colonnade. Each depicts an eagle in profile above the words "UNITED STATES COURT HOUSE" spelled in relief on ceramic veneer panels. The two-story recessed mass above the fourth story has twenty-four bays of windows. Widely spaced individual window bays differentiate the end bays of the tower from the rest of the fenestration.

Alterations: Between 1964 and 1966, the Post Office moved to another site, making way for new courtrooms. The twin entries to the Post Office lobbies, originally located in the recessed bays at either end of the Spring Street steps, were replaced with windows that match the adjacent original windows. The relief lettering beneath the eagle medallions that originally read: "UNITED STATES POST OFFICE AND COURT HOUSE" was modified as well; the words "POST OFFICE AND" were removed and the panels containing "COURT HOUSE" were moved up. New panels matching the original were installed where the "COURT HOUSE" panels used to be.

North Main Street Facade

The North Main Street facade is largely identical to the North Spring Street facade with an extra lower story made possible by the grade change between the two streets. This lower story is sheathed in polished dark granite. Rectangular windows are recessed into the wall on axis with the window bays of the upper stories. Also recessed into the wall are three rectangular doorways within the colonnade's central three bays. Paired bronze doors within bronze surrounds are surmounted by glass transoms bearing stylized cast bronze eagles. Aluminum grilles behind the colonnade (from left to right) depict the seals of five additional Federal departments: Navy, Interior, Agriculture, Commerce, and Labor.

The polished Minnesota granite wall of the lower story extends to the north as a one-story garage with a drive-in entrance and roof-top parking lot. The wall of the garage turns up Aliso Street, abutting the sidewalk. Recessed rectangular windows feature aluminum grilles with abstract floral patterns. A loading dock with an aluminum canopy projects from the building's end wall at the roof-deck level of the garage.

Aliso Street and Temple Street Facades

The Aliso Street and Temple Street facades are identical with minor exceptions. The primary distinctions are the two small, two-story pavilions flanking the loading dock and garage on the Aliso Street facade. The lower portion of each facade consists of a six-story tower flanked by four-story wings that project from the east and west facades. Fluted piers identical to those on the North Spring Street and North Main Street sides demarcate the window bays. The verticality of the relatively slender end of the twelve-story tower is accentuated by five, closely spaced window bays, creating in effect a small Moderne skyscraper on each facade.

Alterations: A walkway that originally served as a postal carriers' entrance at the northwest corner of the building has been abandoned and the door removed. Five pairs of swinging double-leaf doors with transoms and windows originally serving a ground-level mailing platform on Aliso Street have been infilled and replaced with two large doors for maintenance and security.

Building Interior

The building has a gross floor area of approximately 886,077 square feet. The ground floor (at Main Street), the mezzanine, the first floor (at Spring Street), and the second and third floors, all measure approximately 412 feet by 180 feet in plan. These floors encompass the majority of the building's major public spaces, including entrance lobbies on the ground and first floors, courtrooms on the first and second floors, and a system of escalators and ceremonial staircases tying the levels together. Elevator lobbies are located at the center of each floor throughout the entire building. Those on the first three levels are the most elaborately finished. Flanking the elevators up to the fifth floor are stairwells richly finished with marble from the ground to the second floor level. The Spring Street and Main Street lobbies are the building's most ornate spaces featuring polychrome terrazzo floors, ornamental painted plaster ceilings, marble walls, statuary, and ornate aluminum light fixtures.

North Main Street Lobby (Ground Floor)

The Main Street lobby is comprised of entry vestibules, the vestibule, and the oval-shaped public lobby. Three entry vestibules contain interior and exterior pairs of double doors to provide a weather lock. The vestibule space between the entrance vestibule and the public lobby has black and brown marble walls and a barrel-vaulted plaster ceiling illuminated by three, ornate cylindrical light fixtures with reeded prism-glass panes, polished aluminum fittings, clear plate-glass vertical fins and concentric pendant plate-glass circles of descending size. The ceiling has painted borders in an undulating pattern of tans and yellows. A short flight of black marble stairs is divided by ornamental bronze handrails.

The public lobby's walls are clad in a delicate brown Tennessee marble with highlights of golden Sienna Travertine from Montana. Flanking openings off the lobby are engaged columns of Montana black and gold marble. Two, freestanding marble-clad columns are centered in the lobby. The terrazzo floor features compass-like motifs rendered in yellow and red and joined by a serpentine border of green. Alternating diamonds of light and dark red terrazzo cover the remainder of the floor, with bands of light and dark green at the thresholds. Thin borders of alternating black and white tiles outline the different colors and patterns of terrazzo. The plaster ceiling has a painted perimeter of tan and yellow in an abstract floral design. Fourteen

original light fixtures run along the ceiling's perimeter. These round lights have aluminum ceiling plates, milk-glass panes, and clear plate-glass fins. A painted stylized sunburst surrounds each light fixture.

Two carved limestone statues mounted on pedestals in niches at the north and south ends of the Main Street lobby are original to the building. "Law," sculpted by Archibald Garner, depicts a young woman holding a tablet. "Young Lincoln," sculpted by James Lee Hansen, represents Abraham Lincoln as a young man holding a book.

Directly behind the Main Street lobby is the elevator lobby with its red diamond terrazzo floor and a vaulted plaster ceiling. The ceiling's painted border and light fixtures are identical to those of the vestibule. The walls are clad in Montana black and gold marble. The lobby's ten elevators feature reeded aluminum doors. The elevator interiors are paneled in black walnut veneer bordered in ebony, embellished with what appears to be a sandblasted frieze of an abstract geometric pattern. Plexiglass sheathes installed over the walnut paneling protect the veneer from vandalism and unintentional scratches.

Ceremonial stairwells and escalators symmetrically flank the elevator lobby to either side. The stairwells have Tennessee brown marble wainscots and wall panels, brass handrails, and Vermont black marble steps and baseboards. In comparison to the rich masonry decor of the stairwells, the aluminum escalators are more explicitly Moderne in character, with extruded aluminum casings molded into a ribbed pattern. Escalators leading to the first floor (Spring Street level) have tunnel-like, vaulted, low suspended plaster ceilings and recessed incandescent light fixtures.

Alterations: A security checkpoint for people entering the building from Main Street is centered in the lobby. Each entrance vestibule originally had a circular recessed light fixture in the ceiling. The flight of stairs originally had recessed incandescent light fixtures.

North Spring Street Lobby (First Floor)

In comparison to the Main Street lobby, the Spring Street lobby has a larger floor area and higher ceilings, as well as a rectangular plan and cross-axial elevator lobby. Five small entry vestibules, with interior and exterior doors, project directly into the lobby. These doors are reeded aluminum and plate glass with cast-aluminum handles. Unlike the Main Street lobby, the Spring Street lobby has no intermediary vestibule. The walls of the Spring Street lobby are clad in Tennessee brown marble with swirls of white and gray, highlighted with Golden Sienna travertine from Montana. The floors feature a terrazzo pattern similar to the Main Street lobby. The plaster ceiling is flat and embellished with a painted frieze very similar to the Main Street lobby. Other features identical to the Main Street lobby are the aluminum light fixtures and the Moderne-style aluminum escalators that lead to the second floor.

Two PWA-style murals at the north and south ends of the Spring Street lobby convey historical themes. Edward Biberman's mural depicts the founding of the Pueblo of Los Angeles, while Lucien Labaudt's mural depicts an allegory of the State of California. Both murals are original features of the building and, after a long period of absence, were restored and reinstalled in the Spring Street lobby. A third mural also by Lucien Labaudt, entitled "Aerodynamics," is mounted on the ceiling.

Alterations: Between 1964 and 1966, the original Post Office facilities that flanked both sides of the lobby were removed and replaced with eight courtrooms and judges' chambers. Two entrances to the Post Office, originally located on the north and south walls of the lobby, were walled off. Stairs to the second floor courtrooms that originally opened into the Post Office lobby were reoriented to the Spring Street lobby, requiring new portals

near the escalators. In addition, a security checkpoint for people entering from North Spring Street is centrally located in the lobby.

Second Floor Corridor

The second floor contains the eight original courtrooms of the U.S. District Court. The central elevator lobby is flanked by stairwells and escalators and is bisected by a longitudinal corridor. Four courtrooms open off each arm of the longitudinal corridor. Each arm is terminated by a short cross-corridor that communicates with hearing rooms and judges' chambers.

The terrazzo floor of the elevator lobby and corridors is set in a pattern of yellow and gray diamonds, chosen to harmonize with the lustrous wainscot of Montana black and gold marble. The wainscot steps up to frame each courtroom entry. Courtroom doors are covered in red leather with aluminum studs, bases and side panels, the latter terminating in stylized handles with cast-aluminum rosettes. All other doors on the floor are aluminum with reeded finish.

Alterations: At the east end of the corridor, the former library was remodeled into an attorneys' lounge. At the opposite west end of the corridor, the former office of the U.S. District Court Clerk was remodeled into judges' chambers. A non-original suspended tile ceiling, installed to accommodate new HVAC ducts, obscures the original acoustic plaster and the decoratively-banded acoustic plaster ceiling.

Courtroom No. 8⁴

Courtroom No. 8 opens off the second floor corridor via a double-door entry encompassing a small vestibule. The space is generally rectangular in plan and its double-height projects above the third floor level. The room is largely characterized by acoustic tile walls, a plaster ceiling, ornamentation, and walnut finishes and furnishings. A surround around the double-door entry features concentric, recessed American walnut panels that flank the flush, black walnut paneling. This paneling is surmounted by a fretwork plaster frieze. A similar backdrop adorns the judge's bench. An American walnut wainscot, with scalloped black walnut coping, extends five feet up the walls. A boxed parapet over the alcoves at the rear of the spectators' area is supported by pairs of fluted walnut columns with smooth plaster caps. Built-in furnishings, which include the judge's bench, clerk's bench, gallery bench, jury seating, press seating, and lecterns, are essentially intact and incorporate walnut veneer, black-stained walnut trim, aluminum fittings, Moderne-style moldings, and severe rectangular massing.

Ornamentation exists elsewhere in the courtroom. A fretwork plaster frieze encircles the room as coping for the acoustic tile wall cladding. The ornamental plaster molding at ceiling height is embossed with an abstract wave pattern. The flat plaster ceiling has subtly recessed concentric panels. Bas-relief plaster medallions depict the Seal of the United States over both the entry doors and the judge's bench. Either side of the red leather entry doors has two large ornamental aluminum vent grilles designed to look like false doors.

Alterations: Some subtle alterations have occurred in the courtroom. Recessed ceiling lights have replaced the original aluminum pendant light fixtures. The original cork flooring has either been removed or covered with carpeting. The original concave acoustic tile, scheduled for the two side walls, does not exist and may have never been installed. Nonetheless, the walls are covered with textured acoustic tile in keeping with the original

⁴ Judge Paul J. McCormick is identified with Courtroom No. 8 in the Notice of Motion to Dismiss Petition in *Méndez et al v. Westminster*, filed on April 4, 1945; and in "U.S. District Courts," *The Los Angeles Daily Journal*, Jan. 1, 1946, 8. McCormick made his ruling on Feb. 18, 1946.

material.⁵ The original pivoting gates attached to the front row of the gallery benches have been replaced with non-matching gates. The jury seating and press seating are not typical of the original seating type.

Integrity

The U.S. District Court House retains the majority of the essential physical features that made up its character and appearance between 1945 and 1946. The building maintains its original location, its urban setting within the Los Angeles Civic Center complex, its feeling as a mid-20th century Federal courthouse, its overall design, and its association as the place where *Méndez* was heard. Constructed using the highest quality materials and techniques, the building has proven to be very durable. The remainder of this section describes the alterations made with regard to their impact on the integrity aspects of design, material, and workmanship.

Site

In 2006, the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) introduced new elements into the Spring Street plaza entrance as part of its First Impressions Initiative undertaken to balance increased security needs with open space. These new elements include bollards along the sidewalk, period lighting, and a colored starburst pattern on the concrete plaza entry that carries the interior marble design outside. The plaza retains its wide open feel, materials, and design originally envisioned for this entryway.

A new one-story guardhouse built at the entrance to the parking area is modest in character. Its location at the corner of the original parking area abutting Spring Street is nonintrusive to the building's grand entrance as is the new black fence surrounding the parking area.

Exterior

The exterior has undergone very few changes, and these changes have very little negative impact on the building's integrity. The most significant exterior alteration is the 1960s removal of the bronze double-doors and projecting bronze vestibules that served the Post Office on either side of the Spring Street entry. The steel windows and aluminum spandrels installed in their place match the adjacent windows and spandrels. Removal of the words "POST OFFICE" from the original "UNITED STATES POST OFFICE AND COURT HOUSE" signage has not altered its original materials or workmanship.

The 1992 Los Angeles Riots and increasing concerns over security in the wake of the destruction of the Oklahoma City Federal Building in 1995 produced additional minor exterior alterations including the installation of protective bullet-resistant glazing, forced entry-resistant grille gates and grille fences.⁶ Other alterations not considered essential to the building's design and feel include the installation of fan rooms at either end of the penthouse and the revisions at the Aliso Street postal facility, including the abandoned employee entrance, the replacement of five pairs of doors and windows, and the installation of two large doors for maintenance and security.

⁵ According to the 2011 Historic Structure Report: "Two types of acoustic tile were originally scheduled for the original court rooms. The first type is flat with a lightly fissured surface and is specified in three different sizes. The second type was a special concave tile that has either been replaced or was never actually installed." Page & Turnbull, "U.S. Federal Courthouse," 123.

⁶ The National Register nomination identifies alterations made in 1993 in response to the 1992 Riots that heavily damaged the first floor. These items are not identified in Site History, Construction, and Alteration Chronology section of the 2011 Historic Structure Report.

Interior

The most substantial interior alteration, the conversion of the Post Office facilities to modern courtrooms, has compromised the historic integrity of a portion of the building's interior. However, this area is not directly associated with the *Méndez* case since visitors to the 2nd floor courtroom would not have used this space. The remaining important public spaces—the Spring Street and Main Street lobbies, the second floor courtrooms, elevator lobbies, and the escalators and stairs—have undergone only a few significant changes that were undertaken with great sensitivity to materials, design, and workmanship.

Lobbies: Security checkpoints installed in both lobbies constrain the original open feeling of these spaces, but the space's original height and width, the artistic features on the ceiling and walls, and the marble floor pattern all contribute greatly to the aspects of design, feel, and materials. The stairs to the 2nd floor courtrooms, which were reoriented from the former Post Office lobby to the Spring Street lobby, required new portals near the escalators and feature marble material similar to other stairways.

Second Floor Corridor: The suspended ceiling system, although obscuring the original decoratively banded acoustic plaster ceiling, has left the original ceiling intact.

Courtroom 8: A number of minor alterations include changes to the room's lighting, flooring, pivoting gates, some seating, and possibly the acoustic tile walls. Removal of the original suspended aluminum light fixtures and the installation of recessed lighting has added a modern feel to the ceiling, however the ceiling's original material and design, with its concentric panels, is intact. The change in the flooring material from cork to red carpet does not overwhelm the courtroom's feel. The 2011 Historic Structure Report identifies the pivoting gates attached to the front row of the gallery benches as having been replaced with non-matching gates.⁷ How these gates differ from the original gates is not stated, nonetheless, the gates appear similar in material and feel to the spectator benches and do not distract from the overall character of the room. This same report also describes the jury and press seating as not typical to the original seating type, but since this seating is shielded behind a walnut veneer screen, the visual impact upon the court room is negligible or lessened. Lastly, the concave acoustic tile, originally scheduled for the two side walls, does not exist and may have never been installed. According to the 1986 Historic Structure Report prepared for the GSA, "the effect of these concave tiles stacked vertically would have been the creation of a series of vertical channels each about two feet wide echoing the fluting of the columns."⁸ The walls are, however, covered with textured acoustic tile, thus using the same material as originally envisioned. Otherwise, the courtroom's materials, design, workmanship, and feeling are intact in its dominant furnishings, woodworking elements and detailing, all of which give the appearance of a mid-twentieth century courtroom.

Overall, the building retains a high degree of integrity for this nomination as evidenced in its vastly dominant essential features including the site, marble, lighting, and artistic elements; the result being that visitors to the U.S. District Court House today will have largely the same experience as visitors to the courthouse in 1945.

⁷ Ibid., 150.

⁸ As noted in Page & Turnbull, "U.S. Federal Courthouse," 123.